

MALCOLM LOWRY

QUARTERMASTER AT THE WHEEL

Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957) was born in New Brighton, England. He attended the Leys School in Cambridge, where he wrote poems and stories for the school magazine, the *Leys Fortnightly*. In 1927 he sailed to Yokohama as a deckhand on the freighter S. S. Pyrrhus—an experience that inspired his first novel, *Ultramarine* (1933). After graduating, he travelled through Europe and North America. He was briefly institutionalized at Bellevue Hospital in New York before settling down in a seaside squatters' settlement in Dollarton, British Columbia. He then published his second novel, *Under the Volcano* (1947), which is widely considered to be his masterpiece. He returned to Europe in 1954 and died in Ripe, England, from an overdose of sleeping pills. A collection of stories, *Hear Us, O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961), and a collection of poems, *Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry* (1962), were released posthumously. Earle Birney, editor of the latter collection, arranged for the publication of the following poem in the autumn 1961 issue. He also noted that the poem was written in Mexico in 1936 and that it was based on Lowry's early experiences as a sailor.

The Harkness light! Another hour spelled out,
Struck by myself with unction but with doubt.
A man is killed but does not hear the shot
Which kills him; four bells kills me.
Lucky to hear it if I killed myself,—
Whose age haunts calendars upon the screen;
The heroine horn in nineteen eighteen,
Who yesterday was born in nineteen eight.
A pile of magazines assess dead love
On shore, where one light burns no love will wait.
—Past years are volcanoes beyond the wake,

Tomorrow is the sea and then the sea,
To both least faithless when we most forsake,
The one unsealed, the other vomitless
Of Jonah to his gourd or Nineveh . . .
It is a straw to tickle bloodshot eyes
Of quartermasters soldered to darkness,
The stiff wheel and the remembrance of the drowned,
For sinking men to suck at or to claw,
The thought that what we saw we often hear
Too late or not at all, or cannot bear
To know resounding eardrums register . . .
Our siren now! What ugliest ship has not
Borne heart from heart with that deep plangency,
Sadder than masthead's light, a soul
In mourning whose voice is grief gone by.
Roll on, you witless, dark brown ocean, roll,
And light light years and grey ones let us live
Within that gracious nexus of reprieve
Between the fated sight and fatal sound
—Now leave the world to Harkness and to me.